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The Southern Agrarians and the Tennessee Valley Authority

HISTORIANS HAVE GENERALLY MISUNDERSTOOD THE ATTITUDE OF THE Southern Agrarians toward the Tennessee Valley Authority.¹ Donald Davidson, it is true, consistently opposed the Authority from the late 1930s on, but the five other Agrarians who expressed an opinion were generally favorable to the project and two of them were highly enthusiastic.² John Gould Fletcher called the TVA a "success," and desired a similar project for his native Arkansas. Frank L. Owsley described it as

¹Idus Newby, "The Southern Agrarians: A View After Thirty Years," *Agricultural History*, XXXVII (July 1963), 152-53; Thomas L. Connelly, "The Vanderbilt Agrarians: Time and Place in Southern Tradition," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXII (Mar. 1963), 28-29, 33. Historians and literary critics have usually described the Agrarians as nostalgic reactionaries. See Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, 1965), p. 297; John Lincoln Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, 1965), chaps. 3, 4; Charles Rosenberg, "Insurrection," *New Yorker*, XL (Mar. 14, 1964), 169; Gay Wilson Allen, "Criterions for Criticism," *Saturday Review*, XLIX (June 11, 1966), 64-68; George Steiner, "Thought in a Green Shade," *Reporter*, XXXI (Dec. 31, 1964), 36; Wallace W. Douglas, "Deliberate Exiles: The Social Sources of Agrarian Poetics," *Aspects of American Literature*, ed. Richard M. Ludwig (Columbus, Ohio, 1962), pp. 277-300; Robert Gorham Davis, "The New Criticism and the Democratic Tradition," *American Scholar*, XIX (Winter 1950), 9-19; Alexander Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison, Wis., 1966), *passim*; I have sharply criticized Karanikas' work in *Southern Humanities Review*, I (Summer 1967), 199-201. The most extreme view of the Agrarians as political reactionaries is that of James L. McDonald, who asserts that they "wanted to abolish the twentieth century, called for a return to the life of the antebellum South, and opposed all attempts at modernization." McDonald, "Reactionary Rebels: Agrarians in Defense of the South," *Midwest Quarterly*, X (Jan. 1969), 160. I have shown in my Harvard dissertation, "The American Distributists and the New Deal" (1968), that the Agrarians can be more accurately described as radical Populists than as reactionaries, and that they were closer in political outlook to a Borah than to a Talmadge.

²I have been unable to find any written evaluation of the TVA by Lyle H. Lanier, John Donald Wade, Andrew Nelson Lytle, John Crowe Ransom, Stark Young and Robert Penn Warren. Warren told me that he supported the TVA. Interview with Warren, Apr. 19, 1965.

"a great venture in unified public works, planning, and 'pump priming' on a regional development basis." Allen Tate, although dubious about some aspects of the TVA, nevertheless contended that it was "a good thing." Herman C. Nixon asserted that the Authority represented "the most sympathetic use of outside money . . . on a large scale the South has ever known. . . . It is making it possible for more people to live with a little more convenience, security, and happiness in 'God's Valley.'" The Authority, he argued, "may be fairly called the strongest card in the New Deal. . . . The nation needs a series of the grand projects of the TVA type . . . but it seems fortunate that the eroded South became the scene of the first experiment." Henry Blue Kline even worked for the Authority for several years, and during this period wrote an important study on the effect of discriminatory railroad rates on southern industrial development. After leaving the TVA, Kline joined the staff of the St. Louis *Post-Discpatch* where he wrote several editorials defending the TVA and favoring a Missouri Valley Authority modeled on it.³

This support for the TVA grew logically out of the Agrarians' social and political thought and their analysis of the causes of the 1929 depression. The essence of Agrarian social thought was their belief that a society, if it was to be free and prosperous, must have a majority of its people owning productive property. The Agrarians hated modern large-scale industrialization because it centralized the ownership of property among a small percentage of the population and created an insecure and subservient proletariat. They also maintained that the class consciousness and bitter social and economic conflict accompanying industrialization were due to the transformation of the stable, conservative and propertied middle class into coupon clippers and wage slaves.⁴

³Fletcher to Donald Davidson, July 27, 1933, Davidson Papers (Vanderbilt University); Fletcher, *Arkansas* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1947), p. 399; Owsley to Davidson, Aug. 5, 1933, Davidson Papers; Owsley, "Mr. Daniels Discovers the South," *Southern Review*, IV (Spring 1939), 670; Owsley, Oliver P. Chitwood and Herman C. Nixon, *A Short History of the American People* (New York, 1948), II, 634-35. Owsley wrote the section on the New Deal in this textbook. Frank L. Owsley Jr. notes that his father "believed that TVA had given much to the prosperity of the area and helped all of the people. With some reservations, he thought the program did much more good than harm." Owsley Jr. to Edward S. Shapiro, June 11, 1965; Chattanooga *Times*, Nov. 4, 1936; Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1938), pp. 80-81; Nixon, *Possum Trot: Rural Community, South* (Norman, Okla., 1941), pp. 152-53; Professor Don K. Price of Harvard's political science department worked with Kline in the TVA and believes that he was "a thorough convert to the TVA approach." Price to Shapiro, Apr. 7, 1965.

⁴John Crowe Ransom, "What Does the South Want?" *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*, eds. Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Boston, 1936), pp. 83-84; Donald Davidson, "Agrarianism and Politics," *Review of Politics*, I (Apr. 1939), 121-23; Twelve Southerners, "Introduction; A Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York, 1930), pp. xxii-xxv; Tate, "The Problem of

The Agrarians further claimed that the economic centralization occurring under industrialism led to political centralization and autocratic control of the government either by the wealthy or by radicals. They emphasized that both plutocracy and socialism favored economic consolidation, centralized planning and the dispossession of the middle class. Socialism simply carried out the implications of large-scale corporate ownership to their logical conclusion by having the economy controlled by one gigantic public corporation instead of a few private leviathans. As Allen Tate wrote to Malcolm Cowley, "From my point of view . . . you and the other Marxians are not revolutionary enough: you want to keep capitalism with the capitalism left out." Only a program which looked to a return to the widespread ownership of property had a chance to overthrow capitalism and "create a decent society in terms of American history."⁵

The Agrarians blamed the 1929 depression on a gap between production and consumption resulting from the holding down of wages by monopoly capitalists and from the pro-big business policies of the government during the 1920s, especially the high protective tariff. Low wages and the tariff, they argued, had reduced the purchasing power of the working class, had forced the consumer to pay artificially high prices and had deprived farmers of foreign markets for their surplus products. This gap had been temporarily bridged in the 1920s by advertising which, according to Donald Davidson, by "persuading the people always to spend

the Unemployed: A Modest Proposal," *American Review*, I (May 1933), 143, 149; Tate, "Notes on Liberty and Property," *Who Owns America?*, pp. 80-93; Tate, "What Is a Traditional Society?" *American Review*, VII (Sept. 1936), 386-87. The Agrarians believed that Henry Ford, because of his assembly line and the regimentation of his employees, personified large-scale industrialization. See, for example, Donald Davidson's comments in John Tyree Fain, ed., *The Spyglass: Views and Reviews, 1924-1930* (Nashville, Tenn., 1963), pp. 235-38.

⁵Tate quoted by Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York, 1961), pp. 352-53, 458; Davidson, "The Agrarians Today," *Shenandoah*, III (Autumn 1952), 17-18; Andrew Nelson Lytle, "The Backwoods Progression," *American Review*, I (Sept. 1933), 434; Owsley, "The Foundations of Democracy," *Who Owns America?*, p. 67; Henry Blue Kline, "Loophole for Monopoly," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 25, 1946; Ransom, "Shall the South Follow the East and Go Industrial?" Institute for Citizenship, Emory University, *Proceedings of Fourth Annual Session*, Feb. 10-13, 1931 (Atlanta, Ga., 1931), p. 51; the Agrarians believed the liberal attempt to reform large-scale industrialism without extensive socialism was impossible. Government bureaucrats, according to John Crowe Ransom, would be unable to stop at a minimum of direction but "will call for regulation, . . . And the grand finale of regulation, the millenium itself of regulated industrialism, is Russian communism." Ransom quoted by Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens, Ga., 1958), p. 49. The Agrarians were so concerned over the threat of industrial communism that they almost entitled their 1930 symposium "Tracts Against Communism." Rob Roy Purdy, ed., *Fugitives Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956* (Nashville, Tenn. 1959), p. 207.

more than they have, and to want more than they get," offered "precisely the same temptations that Satan offered Christ." The 1929 depression was due, then, to economic imbalances caused by large-scale industrialism and its control of the government—an imbalance between workers and owners, an imbalance between agriculture and industry, and an imbalance between the rural South and West and the industrial Northeast.⁶

The struggle between the Northeast, the center of large-scale capitalism, and the decentralized and propertied societies of the West and South was, according to the Agrarians, the key to understanding America's post-revolutionary history. They praised Frederick Jackson Turner's emphasis on sectionalism, and they agreed with him that the most fundamental fissures in American life were along regional, rather than class, lines. The conflicts between Jefferson and Hamilton, Jackson and Biddle, the North and the South during the Civil War, and Bryan and McKinley were all aspects of this basic antagonism between the industrial and financial Northeast and the South and West with their farmers and small businessmen. "There is no other nation in the Western world," Davidson wrote, "in which sectional alignment on major questions so often occurs." Walter P. Webb's book *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy*, a work highly praised by the Agrarians, confirmed for them the importance of sectionalism. Webb dedicated the book to the "small businessmen of America" who were being slowly crushed by giant corporations. Webb argued that these corporations were the advance guard of an imperialistic and plutocratic northeastern capitalism determined to control the economies of the South and West and to destroy the "traditional principles of American democracy" which were dependent upon the widespread distribution of property. Wherever one went in the South and West, he would find "people in chains and paying tribute to someone in the North."⁷

⁶Fain, ed., *The Spyglass*, p. 238; Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York, 1930), pp. 194-95; Ransom, "The State and the Land," *New Republic*, LXX (Feb. 17, 1932), 8-10; Lanier, "Big Business in the Property State," *Who Owns America?*, p. 22; Owsley, Chitwood, Nixon, *Short History . . .*, II, 605-7. For the emphasis which New Deal thought placed upon this concept of "imbalance," see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), p. 35.

⁷Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1938), pp. 24-25; Owsley, "The Foundations of Democracy," pp. 53-54; Lytle, "John Taylor and the Political Economy of Agriculture," *American Review*, III (Sept. 1934), 432; Lanier, "Mr. Dollard and Scientific Method," *Southern Review*, III (Spring 1938), 669-71; Fletcher, *The Two Frontiers: A Study in Historical Psychology* (New York, 1930), pp. 247-48; Robert Penn Warren, "The Second American Revolution," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, VII (Apr. 1931), 282-88; John Donald Wade, "Old Wine In a New Bottle," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XI (Apr. 1935), 246; Webb, *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy* (New York, 1937), *passim*; for a typical Agrarian

As Southerners, the Agrarians were especially sensitive to the imperialistic and exploitative character of large-scale industrialism. The idea that the South was in economic thrall to the capitalistic North was a staple of southern social thought and southern political rhetoric during the 1930s. For Davidson and the other Agrarians, the nature of the Northeast was "to devour, to exploit, to imperialize," to "walk in silk and satin," while the West and South went in "shoddy." They pointed to the taking over of southern banks, factories and national resources by Yankee capitalists during the late 19th century as illustrating the aggrandizing character of northern capitalism. They claimed that the New South movement, which had encouraged this invasion of northern capitalists, had merely benefited the northern worker and capitalist, while the South had been left impoverished and sucking at the "hind tit."⁸

The dominance of the financial-industrial plutocracy, the Agrarians believed, could be traced back to the southern defeat during the Civil War. They accepted the Beardian interpretation of the war as a struggle between an agrarian, conservative South and an industrial, imperialistic North which destroyed the last major barrier to the complete victory of large-scale capitalism. Fletcher wrote of Reconstruction as

... the hour
When Grant and Wall Street linked, began their work
Which has not ended yet...

After 1865, the Northeast reduced the South and West to "the position of complaisant accomplices and servile dependents," and through the Republican Party enacted a program fostering big business, the centralization of finance, the proletarianization of the middle class and the destruction of agriculture. The Agrarians cited the protective tariff, the Supreme Court's interpretations of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, and discriminatory railroad rates as examples of advantages acquired by northern capitalists because of their control of the national government. They blamed these subsidies and privileges for the post-bellum growth of big business and high finance and the creation of "an economic fascism which threatens the essential democratic institutions of America." The Agrarians argued that the only way to check the eco-

response to Webb's book, see Ransom, "The Unequal Sections," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XVII (Dec. 18, 1937), 6-7.

⁸George B. Tindall, "The 'Colonial Economy' and the Growth Psychology: The South in the 1930's," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXIV (Autumn 1965), 465-77; Davidson, *Attack on Leviathan*, pp. 110-15, 126, 262-92; Fletcher, *Life Is My Song* (New York, 1937), p. 374; Lytle, "The Hind Tit," *I'll Take My Stand*, pp. 202-3; Ransom, "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

nomic imperialism of the Northeast was through a revival of regional sentiment in the South and West resulting in sectional economic self-determination.⁹

The urbanization of the United States dismayed the Agrarians as much as did industrialization. The anonymity, alienation, loneliness and regimentation of the modern American city contrasted sharply, they believed, with rural values and the rural way of life. In addition, they attributed the urban popularity of radical, anti-democratic political movements to the city's large proletariat and its lack of a large property-owning middle class. Davidson's poem "The Long Street" perhaps best reveals the Agrarian attitude toward the modern city.

It was different, once, for Orestes Brown. He lived
 In the hill country where the bluegrass turns
 To upland fallows and tobacco barns,
 A land of no strangers. Orestes Brown had known
 Man, woman, child, both white and black, and called
 Folks by their first names from the Cumberland on
 To his own hearthside. But all that was before
 The family trouble that besets our race
 Drove him to wander through a kinless world
 Till he became a function and a number—
 Motorman Seventeen, on the company rolls—
 For whom, by singular principles of bondage,
 Man, woman, child, both white and black, we were turned
 To strangers all, who dropped their seven cents
 Into the cash-box, so becoming fares,
 Then sat or stood, nameless, till they got off.

⁹Fletcher, *South Star* (New York, 1941), p. 42; Lytle, "Principles of Secession," *Hound and Horn*, V (July–Sept. 1932), 688; Davidson, *Attack on Leviathan*, pp. 110–15; Davidson wrote in his history of the Tennessee River that during the Civil War hunting in the Tennessee Valley had greatly decreased and not since pioneer days had there been such a feast of "wild turkey, quail, deer, and fish of the river. This is the only undebatably 'good result' of the Civil War that any historian has recorded." Davidson, *The Tennessee* (New York, 1948), II, 107–17; Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York, 1961), pp. 13, 42; Lanier, "Big Business in the Property State," p. 18; Kline, *Regional Freight Rates: Barrier to National Productiveness*, U. S. House of Representatives Document No. 137 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1943); Owsley, "The Irrepressible Conflict," *I'll Take My Stand*, pp. 85–89; Fletcher, "Cultural Aspects of Regionalism," *Round Table on Regionalism*, Institute of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, July 9, 1931 (mimeographed, 1931), pp. 6–7; Tate to Seward Collins, Dec. 23, 1933, in Seward Collins Papers (Beinecke Library, Yale University). Indicative of the failure to understand the Agrarians is the comment of Thomas J. Pressley that the Agrarians were "individuals of quite conservative political and economic views" who could be contrasted with the followers of Beard and Parrington who "vigorously criticized the 'New South' spirit and program and insisted that the South's economic difficulties were due primarily to its status as an exploited 'colony' of Northeastern business interests." Pressley, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War* (Princeton, 1954), p. 241.

But he, Orestes Brown, was not content
That people should go back and forth without
The pleasure of a name between themselves
And him; and in the fullness of his heart
He broke the rules—he talked to sulky boys
After the school and movies, or old men
With hound-dog weariness in their eyes, or forms
That had a country slouch about the shoulders.
These last would sometimes talk; the rest, not often.

.....

But I knew how the Lord said long ago:
I have set my face against this city for evil!
And the Lord said: *It shall be given*
To the King of Babylon to burn with fire;
*And desolate is Zion's mount where the foxes run!*¹⁰

The Agrarians pointed to the city's flashy and cosmopolitan artists as proof of its estrangement from traditional American culture. Truly American art, they proclaimed, could be produced only by artists rooted in a provincial and conservative society, such as the South, and not by deracinated and bohemian urbanites who prefer "sophistication over wisdom; experiment over tradition; technique over style; emancipation over morals." New York, "an island of transplanted Europeans anchored off the Atlantic coast," "a spectacular cosmopolitan city of borrowed culture," which attracted "all the celebrities and semi-celebrities of Europe into its orbit," exemplified the metropolis' alienation from the American hinterland.¹¹

¹⁰Wade, "Of the Mean and Sure Estate," *Who Owns America?*, pp. 254–60; Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York, 1930), p. 125; Davidson, *The Long Street: Poems* (Nashville, Tenn., 1961), pp. 64–66; see also Fletcher's poem "Twentieth Century" which described the modern metropolis with its "Pinnacles steeper than all Babels of the Past" and "wreathed with Manhattan mobs that will not rest." *Alcestis*, I (Apr. 1935), n.p.

¹¹Davidson, *Attack on Leviathan*, pp. 68–100; Fletcher, *Life Is My Song*, p. 299; Fletcher, "Regionalism and Folk Art," *Southwest Review*, XIX (July 1934), 432–34; Fletcher, "The Stieglitz Spoof," *American Review*, IV (Mar. 1935), 589 ff.; Richard Crowder, "John Gould Fletcher as Cassandra," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LII (Jan. 1953), 89–91; Tate, "A View of the Whole South," *American Review*, II (Feb. 1934), 416; Tate, "What Is a Traditional Society?" pp. 384–85; Warren, "Literature as a Symptom," *Who Owns America?*, pp. 264–79; Stark Young, "History and Mystery," *New Republic*, LXX (Feb. 24, 1932), 46. Davidson and Fletcher believed the Jew, particularly the New York Jew, embodied the materialism, commercialism, radicalism, deracination and cosmopolitanism characteristic of the city dweller. This led both to espouse a mild form of cultural anti-Semitism. Davidson to Seward Collins, Oct. 10, 1934, Collins Papers; Fletcher to Collins, Dec. 10, 1934; Jan. 18, 1935, Collins Papers; Fletcher to Frank L. Owsley, Dec. 12, 1933, in Owsley Papers (in possession of Mrs. Frank L. Owsley, Nashville, Tenn.); Shapiro, "American Distributists and the New Deal," pp. 66–68, 72–77.

The Agrarians' emphasis on regionalism was not unique during the 1920s and 1930s. The art of Thomas Hart Benton, the regional sociology of Howard Odum and Rupert Vance at the University of North Carolina, and the establishment of regional historical journals such as the *New England Quarterly* (1928), the *Pacific Historical Review* (1932), the *Journal of Southern History* (1935) and the *Bulletin of the American Association for State and Local History* (1941) also reflected the increasing importance of regionalism during this period.

The return of America to a propertied, small town, rural society depended, the Agrarians asserted, upon a political coalition between the West and South. Only if these two sections put aside their differences dating from the Civil War and realized that their common enemy was now the Northeast could industrialism, urbanization and high finance be turned back. As John Crowe Ransom put it, both sections "desire to defend home, stability of life, the practice of leisure, and the natural enemy of both is the insidious industrial system." With the overthrow of the urban industrial-financial plutocracy, the nation's attention could then turn to the plight of the small businessman and the farmer.¹²

The condition of agriculture, particularly southern agriculture, greatly interested the Agrarians. Contrary to what Henry Steele Commager and others have written, most of the Agrarians did not idealize ante-bellum plantation life. Rather, they saw the small southern farmers as uniquely possessing such desirable agrarian virtues as economic independence, strong family ties and religious sentiment. The Agrarians were fully aware of the perilous condition of most small southern farmers. Widespread tenant farming and absentee-landlordism, they argued, had led to economic dependence, dispossession, extreme poverty, political demagoguery and a general atmosphere of hopelessness and degradation. They feared that, if something was not done immediately, the entire South would soon come to resemble one vast Tobacco Road. Davidson, politically the most "conservative" of all the Agrarians, bitterly complained of "Southern lands eroded and worn-out," "the devilish one-crop system and the tenant system," the "illiterate and diseased population" and "the fierce despair" and "terrifying apathy" found throughout the South.¹³

¹²Ransom, "The South Defends Its Heritage," *Harper's Magazine*, CLIX (June 1929), 117; Lytle, "Hind Tit," p. 224.

¹³See the essays by Lytle, "The Hind Tit," Wade, "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius," and Kline, "William Remington: A Study in Individualism" in *I'll Take My Stand*; Nixon, *Forty Acres . . .*, pp. 17-27, 38-49; Fletcher, *Arkansas*, pp. 338-50; Davidson, *Attack on Leviathan*, p. 113. Owsley has been largely responsible for altering the image of the ante-bellum South as a land of slaves, planter aristocrats and poor whites. Using social science techniques, Owsley conclusively demonstrated that the social structure of the Old South

The belief that economic and political collectivism, urbanization and the decay of agriculture were not inevitable, and that the United States could once again become a nation dominated by small proprietors and farmers determined the Agrarians' approach to the problems of the 1930s. They claimed that the trend toward economic and demographic concentration, which had been artificially stimulated through political subsidies, could be reversed by means of electricity. Electricity, in contrast to steam power, could be transported cheaply over great distances, thereby enabling industry to move out of the metropolis and into rural areas. In addition, electricity could easily be adapted to small-scale manufacturing and agriculture, which would allow industry to decentralize and would improve the condition of farming. An intelligent use of electricity, the Agrarians contended, could foster a widespread distribution of property and help rectify the economic imbalance between the South and West and the Northeast. The considerations uppermost in the minds of the Agrarians when they evaluated the electrification program and other aspects of the Tennessee Valley Authority were: would it inhibit the growth of large-scale industry and aid small business; would it help the South in its struggle with the industrial-financial oligarchy of the Northeast; would it encourage the decentralization of the metropolis; and would it improve the status of the southern farmer?¹⁴

The TVA, the Agrarians predicted, by providing "the means for a decentralization of productive wealth," would be "a solid contribution to the economic life of the Valley." They anticipated that the TVA's hydroelectric plants would enable the South to industrialize slowly without repeating the mistakes of northern industrialization. Because the South now had a source of power which could be used by small-scale, rural factories, there was no reason why southern industrialization need be accompanied by the urbanization, political centralization and proletarianization which had occurred in the North. And because southern manufacturing could remain small-scale, southern industrialists could probably secure necessary capital from southern sources without having to go to

was based upon "a massive body of plain folk . . . neither rich nor very poor," who were mostly small, independent farmers. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, La., 1949), pp. vii, ix, 7. For a differing interpretation of the Agrarians which emphasizes their admiration for an aristocratic, stratified society, see Anne Ward Amacher, "Myths and Consequences: Calhoun and Some Nashville Agrarians," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LIX (Spring 1960), 251-64, and Amacher, "Myths and Consequences: Allen Tate's and Some Other Vanderbilt Traditionalists' Images of Class and Race in the Old South" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1956).

¹⁴Nixon, *Forty Acres . . .*, pp. 72, 77-78; Chattanooga *Times*, Nov. 4, 1936; Davidson, Review of *This Ugly Civilization*, by Ralph Borsodi, *American Review*, I (May 1933), 240-41.

New York banks. Control of southern industries would remain in southern hands, industrial profits would stay in the South and could finance further economic development, and the South could begin to free herself from the grip of northern colonialism. Writing in 1943, Henry Blue Kline argued that the TVA had been "a very significant landmark" in the crusade for economic decentralization, and had fulfilled the expectations of the Agrarians.¹⁵

Herman C. Nixon was especially impressed by the activities of the TVA's Industrial Division in behalf of economic decentralization. This division encouraged small-scale manufacturing by inventing and demonstrating machines and methods of manufacturing suitable for small factories, by taking surveys and engaging in other research looking toward local production, and by teaching how the manufacture of goods could be domesticated. The TVA's creation of a series of navigable lakes and rivers and the establishment of several parks also encouraged Nixon. He reasoned that the future growth in the economy would be largely in service-oriented enterprises, such as recreation, rather than goods-producing industries, and that the TVA's rivers, lakes and parks, combined with the area's mild climate, could transform the Tennessee Valley into a prime tourist attraction. The growth of tourism would result in the establishment of countless small businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, and this would mean, in turn, an increase in the number of independent businessmen and a diffusion of property ownership.¹⁶

The Agrarians hoped that the TVA's electricity would also destroy the control of northern holding companies over the southern utility industry. These companies, they contended, had exploited the South through a policy of high prices and low consumption. Not only had the South been paying high electricity bills with the profits flowing north into Wall Street, but many areas of the rural South were without electricity because it had not been immediately profitable to service them. Allen Tate, for one, held that southern economic independence from northern capitalistic control was absolutely dependent upon alternative sources of electrical power. The Agrarians' recognition of the effect of the northern holding companies upon southern economic development resulted in their support for the Public Utility Company Act of 1935, which aimed at breaking up

¹⁵Chattanooga *Times*, Nov. 4, 1936; Nixon, "The South After the War," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XX (Summer 1944), 323; Nixon, *Lower Piedmont Country* (New York, 1946), pp. 153-55; Owsley, Chitwood, Nixon, *Short History . . .*, II, 630-32; Kline, *Regional Freight Rates*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁶Nixon, *Possum Trot*, pp. 118, 152-53; Nixon, *The Tennessee Valley: A Recreation Domain*, Papers of the Institute of Research and Training in the Social Sciences, Vanderbilt University, Paper No. 9 (Nashville, Tenn., 1945), *passim*; Nixon, *Lower Piedmont Country*, pp. 228-29.

the utility holding company empires. They anticipated that this act, by striking at northern control of southern power, would further encourage economic decentralization and promote southern economic independence.¹⁷

Kline's efforts while employed by the TVA to change the national railroad freight rate schedule reflected this emphasis on the need for regional economic independence. He believed these rates had discriminated in favor of the Northeast and against the South and West. Discriminatory freight rates, Kline stressed, hampered the industrialization of the South and West, forced these regions to concentrate on extractive industries and to neglect the more profitable fabricating industries, resulted in artificial economic concentration, and, by destroying free competition, inhibited national productivity.¹⁸

The TVA's electricity, the Agrarians predicted, would benefit the Valley's agriculture as well as its industry. They foresaw electrification of the southern farm lessening much of the monotony, drudgery and long hours of farm labor, thereby helping stem the rural migration to the city by making farming a more attractive occupation. The ownership of machinery by the individual farmer made possible by electrification would increase his standard of living and his economic independence. The farmer would now have the means to process many of his own crops, thus freeing him from dependence on exploitative middlemen. Electrification would also partially end the cultural isolation of farm life by enabling the farmer to enjoy the radio and to read by electric lights. Other aspects of the TVA which Nixon pointed to as beneficial to farmers were the resetting of farmers on more desirable land created as a result of irrigation projects, the establishing of demonstration farms to bring the latest farming techniques to Valley residents, the producing of cheap fertilizers, the developing of inexpensive farm machinery, the teaching of new methods of processing farm products, the investigating of new crops suitable for the Southeast, and the organizing of soil conservation programs.

¹⁷Chattanooga *Times*, Nov. 4, 1936; interview with Warren, Apr. 19, 1965; Kline, "Utilities vs. Southwest," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, June 2, 1946; Kline, "Upholding Public Power Policy," *ibid.*, Aug. 25, 1949; Nixon, *Possum Trot*, pp. 152-53; Owsley, Chitwood, Nixon, *Short History* . . . II, 626.

¹⁸Kline, *Regional Freight Rates, passim*; Kline, *Freight Rates: The Interregional Tariff Issue*, Papers of the Institute of Research and Training in the Social Sciences, Vanderbilt University, Paper No. 3 (Nashville, Tenn., 1942); Kline and Alvin W. Vogtle, *Freight Rates and the South, ibid.*, Paper No. 5 (1943); Kline, "As to Southern-Western Revolt," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Dec. 1, 1946; for Nixon's support of the TVA's work in this area, see "The New Deal and the South," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XIX (Summer 1943), 331; for a general study of the freight-rate issue, see Robert A. Lively, "The South and Freight Rates: Political Settlement of an Economic Argument," *Journal of Southern History*, XIV (Aug. 1948), 357-84.

The TVA, Nixon wrote in 1938, "is the greatest movement in the South for modernizing agriculture, conserving rural manhood, and facilitating village development. It should prove a godsend to hillbillies." The Agrarians, as might be expected, also strongly supported the Rural Electrification Administration which aided farmers in establishing nonprofit electrical cooperatives in order to build power lines. The REA, they believed, would enhance the farmer's economic position and broaden his cultural outlook, and, by encouraging the decentralization of industry, would help restore economic balance to the nation.¹⁹

The major misgivings of the Agrarians regarding the TVA were sociological rather than economic. Some Agrarians suspected the TVA of endeavoring to uplift and modernize the inhabitants of the Valley. Allen Tate, for instance, although strongly in favor of the economic impact which the TVA was having in the Valley, nevertheless attacked it for its reformist spirit. "When the TVA tries to go into the mountains and change ways of living followed by the mountaineers for 150 years," he stated, "it is all wrong. It tries to make them play the radio instead of pitching horseshoes. They've been pitching horseshoes for 150 years and they ought to go right on pitching horseshoes." There were also fears that the TVA's newly created lakes were unnecessarily displacing large numbers of subsistence farmers. Nixon attempted to quiet such fears by claiming that the displacement of farmers had been done in such a manner as to disrupt life least, and that only "a small proportion" of the displaced families had been left stranded, dissatisfied and unadjusted. Both Nixon and Kline emphasized that the efforts of the TVA to work closely with the people of the Valley and through their local institutions indicated a democratic and decentralist orientation. For Kline, the TVA was an "experiment in applied democracy."²⁰

Donald Davidson registered the only major dissent among the Agrarians regarding the TVA. Because Davidson wrote more about the TVA and over a longer period of time than the other Agrarians, historians have naturally assumed that his views were typical. Even Davidson, however, initially welcomed the TVA, and it wasn't until the mid-1930s, and especially after 1940, that he became critical. In 1940, he accepted a com-

¹⁹Nixon to George Fort Milton, Aug. 2, 1934, Milton Papers (Library of Congress); Nixon, *Forty Acres . . .*, pp. 74, 80-81; Nixon, *Possum Trot*, pp. 112, 152-53; Ransom, "What Does the South Want?" p. 189; Kline, "Utilities Rampant Again," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, July 6, 1946.

²⁰Chattanooga *Times*, Nov. 4, 1936; for a criticism of the TVA similar to Tate's by a friend of the Agrarians, see Richmond Croom Beatty, "Mountaineers Are Shakespearean," *Kenyon Review*, III (Winter 1941), 130; Nixon, *Possum Trot*, pp. 152-53; Nixon, "New Deal and the South," p. 322; Kline, "TVA's for Everybody Else?"; Kline, "Wrong Standard, Right Man," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Oct. 29, 1946.

mission to write a two-volume history of the Tennessee River for the Rinehart Rivers of America series, and his work on these volumes deepened and clarified his earlier apprehensions.

In 1934, Davidson claimed that the TVA was an "ideal regional undertaking. It seems to promise a controlled and reasoned development of ways of life and institutions that are adapted to the soil wherein they grow. In principle, it is statesmanlike and highly imagined, and it naturally excites the interest and wins the support of most thinking Southerners." Despite this, Davidson feared the TVA might degenerate into an abstract attempt to reform the South. He warned there was a possibility of the South becoming a laboratory for the social experimentation of TVA bureaucrats and New Deal brain-trusters. He wished to know whether the TVA was "to continue indefinitely under the paternal wing of the federal government, like some gigantic Berea College which distributed humanitarian benefits, but in an external missionary way; or whether it is finally to be integrated with the section of which it is a natural part." Although the heads of the TVA were capable, most of them were not Southerners, and this gave "color to the charge, already current, that the TVA is another Yankee raid into Southern territory." Despite these early misgivings, Davidson believed the TVA to be one of the more hopeful ventures of the New Deal.²¹

By 1936, however, Davidson's attitude toward the TVA had become decidedly negative. Although continuing to believe the TVA manifested a New Deal recognition of the reality of regionalism, he now argued that it was a regionalism which ignored the wishes of the South. The TVA was a foreign body, foisted upon an unwilling South by a distant political bureaucracy. As presently constituted, it was "an irresponsible projection of a planned, functional society into the midst of one of the most thoroughly democratic parts of the United States. It therefore does not guide us very far in our search for the right kind of regionalism." He proposed reforming the Authority so that the South would have effective control over it and could escape the manipulation of its "resources and population by a paternal . . . agency."²²

Davidson, furthermore, predicted that the TVA would lead neither to the decentralization of property, nor to an increase in southern-owned businesses. The TVA was, in reality, a subsidy "to any migrating manufacturers who want to set up shop in the Tennessee Valley, and above all

²¹Davidson, "Where Regionalism and Sectionalism Meet," *Social Forces*, XIII (Oct. 1934), 25-27.

²²Davidson, "That This Nation May Endure: The Need for Political Regionalism," *Who Owns America?*, pp. 124-25; Davidson, "Regionalism as Social Science," *Southern Review*, III (Autumn 1937), 219-20.

to the great monopolistic northern corporations which have a great many articles to sell to the Tennessee Valley people." There was nothing in the purpose or the operations of the Authority which insured that decentralized and southern-owned industries would be fostered. On the contrary, the TVA intended to open up the Valley "to a rush of Northern industry much as the old Indian Territory of Oklahoma was opened up . . . to rushing land speculators and homesteaders."²³

The ultimate goals of the TVA were thus completely alien to the rural culture of the Tennessee Valley. The Authority, Davidson asserted, wished to replace an agrarian economy with industrialism. While industrialists and urbanites would benefit, most of the region's population would soon feel "the impact of an exploitative system." Davidson claimed that the TVA, properly understood, was simply another in the long line of subsidies handed out to northern industrialists since the Civil War. Evidence of this was the Authority's failure to do something about the South's colonial relationship with the North.²⁴

The second volume of Davidson's history of the Tennessee River, published in 1948, brought these scattered criticisms together into an extremely bitter critique of the TVA. He declared that when Congress established the Authority in 1933 it had in mind such traditional governmental concerns as flood control and navigation; there was no thought of even having the TVA engage in competition with private power companies. Nevertheless, the independence granted the Authority enabled TVA bureaucrats to transform it into an instrument for paternalistic uplift by utopian social scientists. It became another attempt to "civilize" the South, following in the footsteps of the Scopes trial and the Scottsboro case. If these bureaucrats "achieved good," Davidson remarked, "it would be the good that they and their staff of experts had pondered and blueprinted, not the good that might emerge from the various assemblies, nonexpert, discursively democratic, of the people of the valley."²⁵

²³Davidson, "On Being in Hock to the North," *Free America*, III (May 1939), 4.

²⁴Davidson, "Political Regionalism and Administrative Regionalism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCVII (Jan. 1940), 138-43.

²⁵Davidson, *The Tennessee*, II, 217-24. Davidson believed that David E. Lilienthal, one of the three TVA directors, was the prime example of a God-playing bureaucrat. For Henry Blue Kline, Herman C. Nixon and most students of the TVA, Lilienthal has been the symbol of the decentralist and democratic impulses within the Authority. Robert Drake wrote that when Davidson mentioned Lilienthal's name he made it sound "like it was one of the vilest words in the English language" ("Donald Davidson and the Ancient Mariner," *Vanderbilt Alumnus*, XLIX [Jan.-Feb. 1954], 21). Davidson fully agreed with President Eisenhower's comment that the TVA was "creeping socialism" ("Regionalism," *Collier's 1954 Year Book*, ed. William T. Couch [New York, 1954], 509); see also Davidson, Review of *Regionalism in America*, ed. Merrill Jensen, *American Literature*, XXIV (Mar. 1952), 95-96.

The displacement of farmers by the lakes created by the TVA exemplified the Authority's paternalistic outlook. Despite the extinguishing of hearth fires, the vanishing of old landmarks and the obliteration of old graveyards, the TVA juggernaut marched on. "There would be tears, and gnashing of teeth, and lawsuits," Davidson wrote. "There might even be feuds and bloodshed. Yet these harms . . . weighed less in the TVA scales than the benefits that would accrue, in terms of industrial and social engineering, to the nearby or the distant majority who sacrificed only tax money."²⁶

Davidson believed there was a basic and irreconcilable conflict between the TVA's engineers and the farmers of the Valley. If the engineers had their way, the Valley farmer would soon become a cattle raiser, "enslaved to the aching compulsive teats of a herd of cows and to the trucks and price scale of Borden, Pet, Carnation," or he might become "a forester, a mountain guide, an operator of tourist homes and hot-dog stands, a tipped purveyor, and professional friend to tippling fishermen, hunters of ducks unlimited, abstracting artists, tired neurotics, and vacation seekers of all sorts." Davidson blamed the TVA's anti-agrarian bias for the decline of subsistence farming in the Valley and the transformation of many farmers into urban slum dwellers.²⁷

Davidson's view of the TVA, despite what some historians have written, was not typical of the Agrarians. This failure to understand the politics of the Agrarians arises out of a belief that reform and liberalism since the 1930s have been a monopoly of the collectivistic left. When collectivistic and urban-oriented historians read that the Agrarians favored the widespread distribution of property, aid for rural America and the destruction of economic, political and demographic centralization, they immediately conclude that Agrarianism was, at best, "conservative," or, at worst an American version of lower-middle-class fascism. In truth, the Agrarians were anti-fascist as well as radical critics of the New Deal. When they criticized the New Deal it was for failing to move more vigorously against high finance and big business, and for neglecting the small businessman and the small farmer.²⁸

²⁶Davidson, *Tennessee*, II, 236–38, 313.

²⁷Davidson, *Tennessee*, II, 289–305; Davidson, "The Agrarians Today," *Shenandoah*, III (Autumn 1952), 20; Drake wrote that it broke Davidson's heart "to think a lot of scientists and sociologists were going to come in and try to make the Valley over again and 'improve it'—people that didn't give a damn about Andrew Jackson or anybody else." Drake, "Davidson and Ancient Mariner," p. 21; see also Louise Davis, "He Clings to Enduring Values," *Vanderbilt Alumnus*, XXXV (Oct.–Nov. 1949), 9.

²⁸For Agrarian opposition to fascism, see Tate, "Fascism and the Southern Agrarians," *New Republic*, LXXXVII (May 27, 1936), 75; Davidson to Tate, May 27, 1936, Tate Papers (Princeton University); and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960), pp. 70–71. For Agrarian criticism of the New Deal for not being

For many American intellectuals the aspirations of rural and small-town America are irrelevant and atavistic. They praise cosmopolitanism and sophistication, and maintain that political and economic centralization and urbanization are inevitable tendencies from which stem the most important and valuable aspects of American culture. The danger of such beliefs is that they alienate the intellectual from the great majority of Americans who do not share his glorification of urbanization and collectivism, and from an America which is not destined to resemble New York, Chicago, Boston and San Francisco. When seen in these terms, the failure to understand the Agrarians, much less appreciate them, reflects the alienation of much of the American intellectual community from the values of their nation.²⁹

radical enough, see Nixon, *Forty Acres . . .*, pp. 56-60; Owsley, Chitwood, Nixon, *Short History . . .*, II, pp. 663-66; Davidson, "Mr. Babbitt at Philadelphia," *Southern Review*, VI (Spring 1941), 700; Tate, "How Are They Voting: IV," *New Republic*, LXXXVIII (Oct. 21, 1936), 304-5, and Review of *Pursuit of Happiness*, by Herbert Agar, *Free America*, II (Oct. 1938), 16-18; Warren, "Robert Penn Warren," *Twentieth Century Authors*, eds. Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York, 1942), p. 1477; Kline, "Mr. Harriman's Idea," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 11, 1947; Lanier to Tate, Dec. 7, 1936, Tate Papers.

²⁹For the overwhelming preference of Americans for small-town and farm life and their corresponding distaste for cities, see the report of a Gallup Poll in the *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1970; for the refusal of America to become urbanized, see Daniel J. Elazar, "Are We a Nation of Cities?" *Public Interest*, No. 4 (Summer 1966), pp. 42-58.

